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Foster care changes sought

[Kelly Nankervis](#) , Midland Daily News

Monday morning, officials gathered to hear personal stories supporting why changes need to be made to the way foster care is conducted nationwide.

The first of six panelists at the Protecting Children, Promoting Families conference at the Ashman Court Marriott Conference Hotel described her experience with foster care, which began when she was removed from her mother's care when she was 15 years old. Jessica Lindsey told the audience that while she did not have the worst experience in foster care, she learned there are things all youths need.

The first foster parent she had become upset when her friends from home, including her 15-year-old boyfriend, began calling. That woman later dropped Lindsey back at the shelter where she had stayed.

"She said she was going to take care of me," Lindsey said. But, "she took me back like I was something she bought at the store."

Other placements led Lindsey to a realization. "Family is not blood for me," she said. "Family is an emotion."

Mark and Judi Bash had a different experience with foster care, one that ended with the death of the 8 1/2-year-old child, Shelly, they desperately wanted to adopt.

In January 1997, the Bashes were called to the University of Michigan hospital to see a newborn with a serious heart defect. After four surgeries, it was discovered the baby needed a new heart.

All the while, the Bashes wanted to adopt her.

"We just knew that we had to do this," Judi said. "She's our daughter."

They discovered that adopting Shelly would end Medicaid, making them responsible for her extremely high medical bills, and their own insurance would not cover the expenses.

Shelly was given her new heart, but her body rejected it.

One morning in March, Shelly and Judi were playing with dolls when Shelly sat up and cried out, "Mommy, help me."

"There was nothing I could do. Shelly died in my arms," Judi said.

Shelly's gravestone has the last name Bash, but it's not her legal name because the papers to adopt her sat on someone's desk in Lansing, Judi said.

These and other stories highlight the main changes that need to occur in foster care, said Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan. Corrigan was a participant in the national Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, which pinpointed the changes that need to occur.

The current federal funding system is inflexible, punishing success and forcing states to keep higher numbers of foster kids to receive funding, she said, adding the goal should be to spend the money to keep families together and children safe.

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care also focused on improving the way courts handle foster cases.

Courts have a huge responsibility in the area of abused and neglected children, Corrigan said. She said there are numerous ways to approach the system, such as giving families more of a voice in proceedings, making each state's highest court accountable and encouraging collaboration between community agencies and the courts.

For more about the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, go to www.pewfostercare.org.

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